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More Than a Wisp of Political Courage

More than a wisp of political courage is implicit in the readiness of President Johnson to stand behind Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara's assessment that it is impractical to erect a defense system against Soviet missiles.

If there is an element of political compromise in the President's approval of a thin ABM defense against Chinese missiles, it is only in the timing. McNamara has long held that this project had merit but he argued that it should be delayed as long as possible in order to incorporate the latest technology.

The secretary's speech in San Francisco leaves the President in a confrontation on a basic nuclear issue with at least three of the Joint Chiefs, Richard Nixon and most of the congressional Republicans, plus such substantial members of his own party as Senators Richard Russell, John Stennis, and John Pastore.

The Russians have left him vulnerable to criticism that he is being duped. Premier Alexei N. Kosygin told McNamara in July that the Kremlin is attracted by his proposal to negotiate a truce in the nuclear weapons race but can do nothing until the end of the war in Vietnam. Meanwhile, the Russians press ahead with a missile defense of their major cities.

The Republicans have no reason to be shy of invoking nuclear questions in the coming political campaign. The Democrats have done it persistently: The nuclear fallout issue of 1956, the missile gap of 1960, and Goldwater and the Bomb in 1964 were all attempts to shake up the public's peace of mind.

McNamara's arguments against the big ABM system seem clear enough when laid out brilliantly as they were in the speech in San Francisco. But can they stand up against the fuzzy over-simplifications of a political campaign?

The most courageous aspect of the Johnson-McNamara position is their refusal to depict the \$5 billion ABM system as a possible first step in the construction of a \$40 billion system. The military has long envisaged the accomplishment of the big project in little steps and many believe now that the anti-Chinese system will lead inexorably to the public's insistence upon an anti-Soviet system.

This expectation is made plausible by the trend that McNamara described as the "mad momentum" that is stirred by the development of nuclear weapons. To combat it, McNamara could not afford the luxury of pretending now that he and the President have left open the question of building the big system.

The future of the Johnson-McNamara position is clouded by the fact that senators like Russell, Stennis, and Pastore have been unready to accept its rationality after the long

hearings of the past nine months. Somehow the crucial point that a missile defense only serves to stimulate the enemy's offensive preparations has been unpersuasive to these seasoned men.

The best hope for McNamara's "race toward reasonableness" in nuclear affairs seems therefore to lie with the Soviets. They know from harsh experience that the nuclear race runs in spirals and the consequence of each new investment is to require more investments at a later date. They have been at it long enough to recognize that this is a race with no finish line short of extinction.

Only last February, Gen. Pavel Batitsky boasted that his antiaircraft troops "can reliably protect" the Soviet Union from air attack. Billions of rubles were spent to deploy the SAM antiaircraft missile all along the borders. Now this investment is bankrupted by the American discovery of an electronic device which throws the missile off-course and leaves Soviet skies open to enemy bombers.

This is the history of weapons. Even today the Pentagon is fostering a new generation of intercontinental missiles, with more thrust to carry more weight and give less importance to the ABMs being deployed around Moscow.

The war in Vietnam yields Kosygin a legitimate reason to defer negotiations but the Kremlin's ultimate attitude toward negotiating the nuclear race will be a critical test of the rationality of the collective leadership. The President has done well to keep open the Soviet opportunity to pass this test.

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